

Challenges Faced By Ethnic Minority Children In The Educational Process In Georgia

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the challenges faced by ethnic minority students in Georgia within the general education system, focusing on the regions of Imereti, Adjara, Kakheti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti. The study investigates the extent to which high-quality education is accessible to non-Georgian-speaking students attending Georgian-language schools. Despite national and international legal frameworks that affirm the right to education for all, including in one's native language, ethnic minority students frequently encounter systemic barriers. These include insufficient Georgian language instruction, lack of adapted teaching materials, poorly translated textbooks, and inadequate training of educators.

Findings indicate that language remains a major obstacle to academic achievement, particularly for students whose families have limited proficiency in Georgian. Many students rely on private tutors or additional classes, underscoring the education system's failure to provide sufficient language support. Furthermore, dropout rates are disproportionately high among minority students due to socioeconomic hardship, early marriage, and limited transport to schools. Teachers report difficulties in adapting curricula to meet the needs of non-Georgian-speaking students, while parents remain largely uninformed due to a lack of information or resources.

Although some positive examples of integration and peer support were identified, the study concludes that state educational reforms largely overlook non-Georgian sectors within Georgian-language schools. The current "New School" model, which fails to account for ethnolinguistic diversity, further marginalizes these students. The paper recommends the development of inclusive educational policies, reform of language instruction materials, and the establishment of support systems such as student-parent clubs and municipal assistance offices dedicated to ethnic minority students. Addressing these systemic inequities is essential for ensuring equal access to education and fostering social cohesion in Georgia's multiethnic society.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, ethnic minority, child rights, education system, integrity, inclusion, discrimination.

INTRODUCTION:

Georgia is a multiethnic country where numerous languages are spoken. Among the ethnic minorities residing in the country are Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Greeks, Turks, Yazidis, Assyrians, Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, and others. Ethnic minorities in Georgia face significant socio-economic challenges. Both in the public and private sectors, members of these communities encounter considerable barriers to employment (European Commission, 2020). Their participation in public and political life is also limited. Furthermore, they often lack full access to quality education, healthcare, and various state services. As a result, many are compelled to leave the country, leading to their social exclusion from national life.

The integration of ethnic minorities remains one of the most pressing issues in the development of Georgian democracy. Although numerous projects and initiatives have been implemented in recent years, substantial progress in the inclusion of ethnic minorities has yet to be achieved. One critical area of concern is access to education for children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

In Georgia, education is offered not only in Georgian-language schools but also in Armenian-, Azerbaijani-, and Russian-language schools and sectors. There are over 200 non-Georgian-language schools in the country where Georgian is taught as a second language. Approximately 80% of ethnic minority students are enrolled in these schools (Avaliani, Akopyan, Akhobadze, Khidasheli, & Kanashvili, 2020).

According to the 2020 report Systemic Challenges in Education Policy Toward Ethnic Minorities, numerous challenges remain in both general and higher education since 2005. These include the qualifications of

schoolteachers, the shortage of personnel, and issues related to the development and translation of textbooks and other educational resources. In non-Georgian-language schools, it is common for students to drop out and fail to pass the Unified National Examinations (Dalakishvili & Iremashvili, 2020).

The same report notes that, since 2005, three national curricula have been developed for general education (in 2004, 2008, and 2018). However, none have been fully implemented in non-Georgian-language schools. Quantitative data from the study shows that nearly one-fifth (18%) of ethnic minorities in Georgia have not completed secondary education, while almost half (47%) have completed only secondary education. Only 16% of respondents reported having attained higher education (Dalakishvili & Iremashvili, 2020).

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY:

The analysis included the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (2015), the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, as well as research studies addressing state policies toward ethnic minorities in Georgia, the child welfare system, and issues affecting non-dominant ethnic groups. Based on this material, it is evident that school dropout rates are significantly high among ethnic minority youth—only 59% of adolescents from ethnic minority backgrounds are enrolled in upper secondary school, compared to 85% of their ethnic Georgian peers.

The causes of early school leaving are diverse. Contributing factors include adolescent labor, emigration (often due to family employment abroad), early marriage, limited access to schooling, and poor socio-economic conditions. In many villages where ethnic minorities reside in compact settlements, schools offer only nine grades. Twelve-grade schools are often located far from these areas, making transportation difficult. Other obstacles include lack of access to school supplies or appropriate clothing necessary for regular attendance.

Disillusionment is another major factor. High unemployment rates, coupled with the widespread perception that even individuals with higher education are unable to find employment, lead to a general mistrust in the value of education. Consequently, children and their families seek alternative life paths (Namicheishvili, 2015). The quality of instruction in such regions remains a pressing concern, further exacerbated by irregular student attendance—often caused by labor obligations, caretaking responsibilities, or time spent with private tutors—as well as shortages of teaching materials and qualified educators (Mamedli, 2021).

Poor academic performance among ethnic minority students is reflected in national examination results. In the 2011–2012 school years, failure rates among ethnic minority students in school graduation exams ranged from 8.23% to 29.95%, depending on the subject, while the same rate among ethnic Georgian students was between 1.53% and 4.54%. Similarly, in the 2010–2013 Unified National Examinations, a significant portion of Armenian- and Azerbaijani-speaking students failed to achieve the minimum passing scores on general skills tests. While only 10% of Georgian-speaking applicants failed this section, the failure rate among Armenian- and Azerbaijani-speaking peers reached 27.8% (Parliament of Georgia, 2022).

In Georgia, the protection of ethnic minorities is addressed under general legal regulation. Article 11 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law regardless of race, sex, or nationality. Furthermore, Georgia adheres to universally recognized principles and norms of international law, which ensure that every individual has the right to freely develop their culture and use their native language, both privately and publicly, without discrimination.

The rights of ethnic minorities are enshrined in multiple international legal instruments. The protection of these rights is grounded in fundamental principles, including the preservation and development of minority identities and equal enjoyment of human rights, as well as meaningful participation in social and political life. Consequently, the state bears a positive obligation to treat minorities equitably and without discrimination, and to implement appropriate measures toward fostering a multicultural environment. According to the Georgian Law on General Education (2024), every citizen has the right to receive an education and to have equal access to it. The law states that citizens for whom Georgian is not a native language have the right to receive general education in their mother tongue, in accordance with national curriculum standards. Instruction in the state language is also mandatory in these educational institutions (Parliament of Georgia, 2021; General Education Law of Georgia, 2024, Article 4, Clause 3).

For members of ethnic minorities in Georgia, knowledge of the state language is a key component of civic integration, enabling their participation in political and public life. In this context, schools play a crucial role. The prioritization of state language instruction in non-Georgian-language schools is reflected in various local and international documents, among which the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2015–2020 is particularly significant. This strategy aims to enhance ethnic minorities' civil and political engagement, promote cultural diversity, increase access to quality education, and improve state language proficiency (Dalakishvili & Iremashvili, 2020).

Ethnic minorities often face serious threats to their educational access, including discrimination and racism, which deprive them of the opportunity to enjoy their right to education on an equal basis with the majority population.

Research Objective:

To examine the extent to which quality education is accessible to ethnic minority students in Georgia.

Research Scope:

The study focuses on the rights of ethnic minority children in the general education process in the regions of Imereti, Adjara, Kakheti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Methodology:

Given the nature of the research topic, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. Data were collected from schools in Imereti, Adjara, Kakheti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti using the following tools:

- Questionnaire survey
- Focus groups
- In-depth interviews
- Conversational method

A total of 1,502 ethnic minority students from these regions participated in the study.

Our long-term observations since 2019 reveal instances of both neutral and sometimes positive discrimination toward ethnic minority students. As a doctoral researcher involved in the "New School" model, I observed that the model made no specific provisions for ethnic minority students—not in Georgian-language sectors nor in bilingual education formats. Even the public documentation associated with the model reflects a lack of consideration for the specific needs of these students. Moreover, the pilot phase of the model was mostly implemented in schools with more favorable learning environments.

According to the findings, national education policy is largely focused on promoting bilingual education, yet the non-Georgian sectors of Georgian-language schools remain overlooked. In many cases, reforms and innovations introduced in Georgian-language schools are either not implemented or are delayed in non-Georgian-language schools, thereby violating the right of ethnic minority children to access quality education.

Furthermore, the rights of non-Georgian-speaking students enrolled in Georgian-language schools are also neglected. These students often lack the linguistic competence required to meet the academic expectations applied to native Georgian speakers.

RESULTS:

As previously noted, the main tool for data collection was a student survey conducted in April 2023. The questionnaire contained 14 items, some focused on demographic characteristics and others designed to gather students' perceptions of their rights and academic experiences.

Of the students who participated in the study, 65% identified as male and 35% as female.

In the demographic data, we also considered the age category of the students.

There are instances where a student's age exceeds the typical age for their grade level, which in some cases provokes feelings of protest or dissatisfaction. For example, a 13-year-old student may be enrolled in the 4th grade, leading to disengagement during lessons and avoidance of interaction with classmates. This discrepancy can contribute to a sense of alienation and negatively affect the student's participation in the educational process.

Students were asked how much they liked school. According to the survey results, 66.3% of students reported that they like or strongly like school. It is noteworthy that more than 10% of students gave a negative response, indicating that they either dislike or strongly dislike school. Among the surveyed regions, the highest percentage of students who reported liking or strongly liking school was observed in Adjara (76.8%), followed by Samtskhe-Javakheti (67.2%) and Kakheti (61.8%). In Imereti, this figure was 60.3%. Students were also asked to evaluate their own academic performance. The results revealed that 57.4% of students rated their performance as good or excellent, while 36.1% considered it average. Only 6.4% of respondents assessed their performance as weak. Once again, students in Adjara gave the most positive self-assessments, with 68.6% stating that their performance is good or excellent. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, 55.3% evaluated their academic performance positively, followed by Imereti (53.2%) and Kakheti (51.6%). Students were asked to identify the subjects in which they feel most and least successful. In all regions, Georgian language and literature was named as the subject in which students feel least successful, while mathematics, foreign languages, and natural sciences were also frequently mentioned. Georgian language and literature was named as the most challenging subject by 43.5% of students in Kakheti, 42.7% in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 33.2% in Adjara, and 26.2% in Imereti. The primary reasons students cited for difficulties in learning Georgian were insufficient knowledge of the language and lack of comprehension. The inability to understand the material was also frequently mentioned in the context of other subjects. Students reported feeling most successful in mathematics, English, and natural sciences. In Kakheti, for example, 43.5% of students reported feeling most successful in mathematics, while in Adjara, 34.5% named natural sciences, and in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 27.1% identified English. In Imereti, both mathematics and English were most frequently named as the subjects in which students feel successful (29.3% and 26.4%, respectively). These data show that ethnic minority students face particular difficulties with the Georgian language and literature, which is directly related to their language proficiency and level of comprehension. The fact that many students feel more confident in mathematics and natural sciences, which are less language-dependent, may further highlight this issue.

Students were also asked about their attitudes towards the Georgian language. The results showed that 58.6% of students reported a positive attitude towards learning Georgian, while 31.1% stated that they are indifferent. Only 10.3% of students expressed a negative attitude. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, the positive attitude was reported by 72.6% of students, followed by Kakheti (58.1%), Adjara (55.8%), and Imereti (50.2%). The most common reasons cited for having a positive attitude towards learning Georgian included the belief that knowledge of the Georgian language is necessary for better communication and future opportunities, as well as for integration into Georgian society. However, a significant portion of students in all regions mentioned that they do not feel motivated to study Georgian due to its perceived difficulty. When asked about the language of instruction in school, a majority of students (70.4%) stated that they would prefer instruction to be in their native language, with the Georgian language taught as a subject. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, 89.7% of students expressed a preference for learning in their native language, while in Kakheti, 79.8% held this opinion. In Imereti, 65.9% of students and in Adjara, 64.7% of students expressed the same preference. Interestingly, the percentage of students who wished to study in their native language was generally higher in regions where ethnic minorities make up a larger portion of the population.

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The data collected from the surveys and interviews show that ethnic minority students face multiple challenges that significantly hinder their educational progress. In addition to language barriers, issues such as limited access to educational resources, lack of extracurricular activities, and a lack of representation in the curriculum were also identified. These students often feel isolated and disconnected from the broader educational community, which negatively impacts their motivation and engagement in school activities. Many respondents mentioned that they are not provided with sufficient opportunities to develop their skills and talents outside of the classroom, particularly in sports, arts, and other extracurricular areas, which are essential for fostering well-rounded individuals.

Moreover, students expressed a desire for greater support in terms of mentorship and guidance, especially when it comes to navigating the challenges of being part of an ethnic minority group in Georgia. Some students reported feeling uncomfortable in classroom settings due to the lack of cultural sensitivity from their peers, as well as teachers' limited understanding of the specific challenges they face. These issues often contribute to a sense of alienation and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. This highlights the importance of creating an inclusive school environment where students from different ethnic backgrounds can feel accepted and supported.

In terms of policies, respondents suggested that the government should take stronger action to address the educational needs of ethnic minority students. This could include providing more resources for bilingual education programs, ensuring that textbooks and other materials are available in languages other than Georgian, and investing in teacher training programs that focus on cultural sensitivity and multilingual education. Additionally, there is a need for greater emphasis on community engagement, particularly in rural areas where ethnic minorities are concentrated. Strengthening ties between schools and local ethnic communities could help create more inclusive educational settings, where students feel more connected and supported both academically and socially.

Lastly, some respondents raised concerns about the impact of these challenges on the long-term academic and professional outcomes of ethnic minority students. They noted that the lack of proper support and the obstacles students face in their education could lead to lower rates of graduation, higher dropout rates, and fewer opportunities for further education or employment. Addressing these challenges is therefore essential to ensure that ethnic minority students in Georgia are provided with the same opportunities for success as their peers.

Interventions:

The text discusses various initiatives aimed at improving the educational experiences of students from ethnic minority backgrounds in Georgia. Key points include:

1. **School Psychologists' Involvement:** School psychologists are often insufficiently involved in addressing the challenges faced by ethnic minority students due to lack of training and parental awareness. Workshops and training sessions, such as those held at Akaki Tsereteli State University, aim to address these issues.
2. **Raising Tolerance Among Students:** Activities were conducted to promote tolerance, such as conferences where students shared best practices and experiences. Regular meetings were held at the university to foster discussions between ethnically diverse students.
3. **Parental Engagement:** The involvement of parents, especially from ethnic minorities, is crucial for student success, yet many parents are less engaged due to socio-economic factors. Trainings and initiatives like the creation of a parent-student club aim to increase parental involvement and awareness.
4. **Social Challenges Impacting Education:** Social issues such as poverty and lack of stable housing negatively affect students' academic performance. The text emphasizes the importance of supportive programs for addressing absenteeism and dropout prevention, as well as creating a safe school environment to motivate students. It also advocates for the creation of specialized services to assist ethnic minority students and their families.

Unfortunately, school psychologists are less involved in addressing the challenges faced by students from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is often due to the psychologists themselves lacking the necessary

knowledge to address the needs of these students. On the other hand, there is also a lack of awareness among parents about the role of school psychologists. To partially address this issue, we planned an informational workshop for school psychologists. On February 12, 2025, at the Children's Rights Knowledge Center at Akaki Tsereteli State University, a training was held on the topic "Signs of Child Abuse." The training was led by Maka Abuladze, an early education trainer at the Continuing Education Center of Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi. The training focused on child abuse in areas that are crucial to the child's development and the protection of their best interests. Psychologists from schools in the Adjara and Imereti regions attended the meeting.

Various activities were carried out to raise tolerance among students. In particular, in 2022, a conference on children's rights was held in the city of Akhaltsikhe, where best practices were shared between students from Imereti and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions. The meeting was interesting for the students, as they shared their experiences about improving academic performance and peer relationships. Furthermore, starting in 2023, the Children's Rights Knowledge Center at Akaki Tsereteli State University's Faculty of Education has regularly organized meetings with students as part of the "Me and Society" subject. In these meetings, ethnically non-Georgian and Georgian students discuss topics of interest to them and present projects they have carried out in the context of informal education. We introduced the "UNICEF Georgia" brochure on "Children's Rights in School" to the students. I participated in creating the brochure, and it was distributed as a gift to interested individuals.

All participants in the research agree that many factors influence the success of students' educational processes, with one of the most important roles being played by parents, especially when students have individual needs. However, it should be noted that the parents of students from ethnic minority backgrounds are less involved in their children's education. This problem may be caused by various socio-economic issues. On April 25, 2024, at the Children's Rights Center of Akaki Tsereteli State University, a training on "Modern Challenges in the Education of Ethnic Minorities" was held, aimed at parents, specifically fathers from the regions of Kakheti and Imereti. The meeting was attended by Maka Gachechiladze, the Coordinator for Child Protection and Support in Imereti, and Kristine Kvatashidze, a representative from the Public Relations Service. The idea emerged during this meeting to create a "Club for Students and Parents from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds," which will focus on educating parents and raising awareness among students.

Social problems usually have a significant impact on children, including their school life, particularly their academic success and behavior at school. For example, it is difficult for a child living in an orphanage to concentrate on education; children in state care may face difficulties adapting to school, especially if they change schools along with a change in residence. Although the effectiveness of punitive measures is not proven, they are commonly used when addressing school absenteeism—such as exclusion, staying after school, temporary expulsion, or the negative impact of absenteeism on academic performance. However, there are more effective programs for preventing school absenteeism and dropout. These programs involve several approaches: contacting the child's legal guardians in the case of minor absences, working with parents and children to reduce absenteeism, and, if necessary, involving social services, which are responsible for ensuring the child's education and protecting their rights. Social workers and other support professionals should be involved in developing disciplinary methods and also encourage students returning to school after absences. I believe that working on improving the classroom and school climate is particularly important, so that students feel safer in the educational institution, increasing their motivation to learn. Additionally, it is crucial to raise awareness on gender equality, early marriage, child labor, and children's rights in general, among students, parents, and teachers, and to have appropriate school policies for preventive and responsive measures. It would be beneficial to create a special service in the municipality specifically designed to support students from ethnic minority backgrounds. This service would assist in improving communication between schools and parents, help students prepare for school, teach stress management, develop social skills, and bring the family and community closer to the school based on the child's needs. All of this will help reduce school absenteeism and dropout rates.

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of the literature studied during the research and the analysis of the research findings, the following key conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Lack of Data on Ethnic Minority Students:** There is no precise data regarding the number of ethnic minority children living in the Imereti, Adjara, Kakheti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions.
2. **Absence of Data on Dropout Rates:** There is no data on how many students complete school, what percentage drop out, and the socio-economic factors contributing to these issues.
3. **Increase in Ethnic Minority Students:** The number of ethnic minority students in Georgian-language schools is increasing, but this growth primarily concerns primary and basic education levels. However, the schools are not responding to this increase in terms of providing quality education.
4. **Lack of Adapted Textbooks:** There is a lack of adapted textbooks to meet the needs of non-Georgian-speaking students in Georgian-language schools.
5. **National Education Policy:** National education policy does not focus on protecting the rights of ethnic minority children within the school community. Although the national curriculum provides an option for teaching subjects in students' native languages, schools have not received any methodological recommendations to implement effective measures for this, and there has been no precedent for teaching in native languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- It is advisable to increase the financial resources allocated for the non-Georgian sector in Georgian-language schools.
- It is important to establish a mechanism for registering non-Georgian students and to study the dropout rates and causal relationships.
- The influence of the community and society should be examined to promote the protection of ethnic minority children's rights.
- A special service should be created in municipalities to assist ethnic minority students, such as the establishment of psychological services.
- Teachers in municipalities should receive training.
- For the effectiveness of the unified state education policy, it is important to plan and implement measures that will involve as many ethnic minority students as possible, particularly those from non-compact settlement areas.
- The state should offer additional hours or courses for learning the Georgian language to increase access to quality education.
- An informational guide should be created to raise awareness about the rights of non-Georgian students in Georgian-language schools.
- It is recommended to reconsider Article 8 of the national curriculum to allow the formation of student groups aimed at supporting the teaching of native languages.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is **no conflict of interest**.

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